

Withes

Everyone is familiar with the woods dotted about in the countryside, but it may not be so well known that up to about 50 years ago they were cropped in the same way as the farm fields. It was not the trees, mostly oak, that were valuable, in fact due to the expense of cutting and carting they were not and still are of little value. It was the Underwood, mostly Hazel, where the value lay and since this has not been regularly cut is now mostly dead.

There is always a path (ride) through the wood wide enough for horses and a wagon to pass, often up the middle. The Hazel was cut in winter while the sap was down and cutting ended by the 31st March. As a rule, a quarter of the wood was cut at a time and this was done in rotation. As the cutting proceeded the Hazel was piled in tidy heaps ready for tying up and it was usually all cut.

Although there would be hundreds of bundles to tie, no string or wire was used but withes were, Hazel about finger thickness wound and formed into an eye on the frith end. This made them very strong and the bundles were rolled underfoot while the withe was pulled tight and twisted into a knot. This whole operation called for skill and practice. As the heaps of Hazel were tied up it was sorted into many categories. Withes for the tying, Hedgestakes and binders, beansticks, pea boughs, flower sticks, wire netting stakes, clothes props, spar timber for thatching and rods about 3 ft long for corn rick thatching.

The spar timber for thatching was split into four. You can see it on any thatched roof; it's about 3ft long. Some was twisted in the middle to form a staple to push onto the straw to hold down the spars. The Thatcher of course would do this but care would be used in selecting timber without knots for this. All the wood not fit for anything else was tied into faggots which were used to chop up to light fires, all the coal merchants sold them.

All the various bundles contained a required number of pieces; I think it was 50-spar timber, 25 stakes, pea boughs and bean sticks. The faggot and pea boughs needed only one withe, the other bundles two.

This clearing of the wood encouraged the flowers to grow and the next spring after the cutting, there would be a carpet of primroses and anemones, the bluebells seem to flourish in any condition but the Purple Orchid and in some woods, the Butterfly Orchid appeared again. As the Hazel grew again the flowers declined but after about 15 years it was ready to cut again.

Cecil Longhurst